NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
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CHRIS KERN

ELECTION '76: THE CAMPAIGN AND THE PRESS

ANNCR:

THE NEWS COVERAGE OF THIS YEAR'S AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN HAS ITSELF BECOME A SUBJECT OF COMMENT, AND CHRIS KERN HAS SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE WAY REPORTERS AND THE CANDIDATES INTERACT.

VOICE:

JUST A FEW ELECTIONS BACK, THE PHRASE "MEDIA EVENT" WOULD HAVE PRODUCED BLANK STARES FROM MOST AMERICANS, BUT TODAY IT'S AN ACCEPTED PART OF THEIR POLITICAL LEXICON.

A MEDIA EVENT IS A CAMPAIGN APPEARANCE THAT IS STAGED TO ATTRACT NEWS COVERAGE -- AN EVENT THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN QUITE DIFFERENT, OR THAT WOULDN'T HAVE TAKEN PLACE AT ALL, IF THE PRESS HADN'T BEEN THERE TO WITNESS IT. PRESIDENT FORD'S STEAMBOAT RIDE THROUGH THE SOUTHERN STATES WAS A RECENT EXAMPLE OF A MEDIA EVENT. SO WAS JIMMY CARTER'S "WHISTLESTOP" TRAIN RIDE THROUGH THE EAST.

MR. FORD'S STEAM BOAT AND MR. CARTER'S TRAIN WERE, IN EFFECT, "PROPS" THAT WERE DESIGNED TO ATTRACT THE TELEVISION CAMERAS. THEY WERE CHOSEN NOT FOR THEIR TRANSPORTATION VALUE BUT FOR THE NOSTALGIC VISUAL IMAGE THEY WOULD PROVIDE ON THE EVENING TELEVISION NEWS PROGRAMS. THEY PRODUCED THE INTENDED EFFECT. BOTH ATTRACTED LARGE NUMBERS OF REPORTERS AND BOTH RECEIVED EXTENSIVE COVERAGE. BOTH WERE INTERESTING EVEN IF THEY WEREN'T PARTICULARLY MEANINGFUL.

BY CONTRAST, THE FIRST OF THE FORD-CARTER DEBATES WAS -- TO MOST JOURNALISTS -- A DISAPPOINTMENT. THIS MEDIA EVENT --

ACTUALLY A PARALLEL PRESS CONFERENCE -- WAS WIDELY CRITICIZED BY NEWSMEN AS DULL, AND MUCH OF THE DISCUSSION SINCE THEN HAS BEEN ABOUT HOW THE FORMAT MIGHT BE MADE MORE EXCITING.

BUT UNLIKE MOST MEDIA EVENTS, THE IMPORTANCE OF THE DEBATES HAS VERY LITTLE TO DO WITH THEIR ABILITY TO INTEREST THE PRESS. THE FIRST ONE PRODUCED VERY LITTLE INFORMATION THAT WASN'T KNOWN BEFORE AND PERHAPS ITS MOST DRAMATIC MOMENT WAS WHEN THE SOUND WENT OFF.

SIGNIFICANTLY, HOWEVER, THE PUBLIC OPINION POLLS INDICATE THAT THE VOTERS WEREN'T BORED BY THE DEBATE THE WAY THE REPORTERS WERE. THAT'S BECAUSE, UNLIKE THE REPORTERS, THE VOTERS WEREN'T LOOKING FOR "NEWS" AND SO THEY WEREN'T DISAPPOINTED WHEN THERE WASN'T MUCH OF IT. THIS MEDIA EVENT WASN'T DESIGNED TO ATTRACT REPORTERS, BUT TO GIVE THE VOTERS A CHANCE TO SEE AND HEAR AND JUDGE.

GH/MAH/RCS